

“Mao Ce-tung elvtárs igen behatóan érdeklődött a magyarországi helyzet iránt”: Magyar–kínai kapcsolatok 1949–1989 [“Comrade Mao Zedong took a very close interest in the situation in Hungary”: Sino–Hungarian relations 1949–1989]. By Péter Vámos. Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2021. 878 pp.

With his new book, sinologist-historian Péter Vámos has offered an engaging and detailed contribution which will be of particular interest to readers curious to learn more about the history of East Asia and the history of Hungarian diplomacy. The fruit of decades of research, the book is a compendium of source materials on Sino–Hungarian relations from 1949 to 1989. Published jointly by the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church and L’Harmattan Publishing House, the volume begins with a 180-page study in which Vámos examines four decades of Sino–Hungarian relations, divided into six periods. The first period (1949–1956) shows the development of relations between the two distant countries, from the first tentative steps towards a “Free China” through the establishment of diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level and then the everyday operations of the mission in Beijing. During this period, behind the scenes, relations were characterized by mistrust. Chinese foreign ministry staff were not yet allowed by the Chinese government to maintain private relations with foreigners, and the Chinese negotiating style was utterly unfamiliar to Hungarians. There was also a dearth of Hungarian diplomats with any competence in Chinese, a problem that was only remedied in 1955 with the recruitment of two young men, Endre Galla and Barna Tálás, who had completed their studies in the target language environment. From the perspective of economic relations, Hungarian exports at that time consisted first and foremost of heavy industrial products: one third of the buses on the streets of the Chinese capital were produced in Hungary at the Ikarus plant, but there were other Hungarian exports the quality of which left something to be desired in Chinese opinion. One of the most important bilateral events of the period preceding the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was János Kádár’s participation in the congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which, according to the sources cited by Vámos, had a considerable influence on Kádár’s later career. His participation in the congress could be considered Kádár’s first major international appearance.

The pivotal moment of the second period (1956–1959) is the Hungarian Revolution and the developments which came in its wake. The Chinese press referred to the events in Budapest as both a “peaceful student march” and a

situation that was taken advantage of by “counterrevolutionaries.” As is widely known, on October 30, 1956, the Soviet government issued a declaration concerning the full equality among socialist countries, and this declaration was welcomed by the Chinese, though at the same time, China condemned the Soviet Union’s “great power chauvinism.” This declaration was interpreted by the Hungarian press as a declaration of support for the Hungarian Revolution by the Beijing leadership, but the day before the Soviet intervention on November 4, the Chinese party newspaper *People’s Daily* (*Rénmín Rìbào*) stressed that the Chinese people were firmly on the side of the “Soviet-led socialist camp.” The documents collected by Péter Vámos show that after the Hungarian Revolution, Beijing and Budapest developed deeper cooperation than ever before, beginning with the visit of Premier Zhou Enlai to Budapest in January 1957. The latter event was a major victory from the perspective of the international legitimacy of the Kádár regime, and one of the documents in Vámos’s book reveals the immense efforts made by the organizers (including Béla Biszku, who was in the press a great deal in Hungary over the course of the past decade or so because of his involvement in the repressive measures taken after the defeat of the 1956 Revolution) in preparation for the visit. Zhou Enlai even went so far as to suggest that the leaders of the “counterrevolution” not be executed immediately and that their sentences be reduced if they confessed.

In the late 1950s, however, relations between the Soviet Union and China became permanently strained, and this naturally had an impact on Sino-Hungarian relations as well. Vámos’s research reveals that the Hungarian authorities were already encountering signs of efforts to maintain a level of secrecy on the Chinese side in 1960. Accordingly, the third period of his study (1960–1969) is about the steady deterioration of bilateral relations between the two countries. It is worth noting that, in Kádár’s view, the radical Chinese position was a result of domestic political conditions. China, he felt, needed to maintain a permanent enemy image as a consequence of blunders in economic policy. In November 1960, Ferenc Martin, the Hungarian ambassador in Beijing, made clear in his report that bilateral relations were “on the surface very cordial, but essentially not the same as they once were,” and a year later, Foreign Minister János Péter issued a decree establishing rules for contacts between Hungarian diplomats and Chinese citizens. (I would add a note here and remind my reader that, in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, a little to the east of China, special guard posts were erected at the time in front of the embassies of the Soviet bloc countries to control contacts between Eastern European diplomats and local citizens.)

In the open conflict between the Soviet Union and China, Hungary naturally sided with the Soviet Union, which led to harsh criticism of Hungary from the Chinese side. In 1964, a Hungarian state party delegation went to Beijing, and Zoltán Komócsin, a party functionary, made provocative remarks concerning his experiences after his return home. According to Komócsin, the cult of personality in China was “beyond the imaginable,” and “you can’t talk to anyone without quoting Mao Zedong by the time you reach the third sentence.” Vámos’s study also reveals how the Soviet leadership in the late 1960s sought to unify policy towards China among the countries of the socialist bloc. However, even then, there were Soviet satellite countries (namely North Korea) the leaders of which simply did not attend the Moscow summit in order to avoid taking a clear stand on tensions between the Soviets and the Chinese. Following the Sino-Soviet split, the political committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) and, later, the government adopted four resolutions (in 1965, 1970, 1979, and 1982) establishing the framework for Hungary’s China policy from the mid-1960s until the fall of communism. Vámos has included all four documents (together with an analysis of each), as these resolutions exerted a significant influence on the narrative of the period.

The fourth section of the study (1969–1982) focuses on the slow rapprochement between Hungary and China, the initial phase of which concerned Hungarian reactions to the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969. The Hungarian mass media and the aforementioned party functionary Zoltán Komócsin naturally fully aligned themselves with Moscow and condemned the Maoist leadership in the strongest possible terms. Behind the scenes, however, Sino-Hungarian relations slowly began to soften, and the Chinese side made several gestures towards Hungary. The documents of this little-known process are also included in Vámos’s book, and they offer insights into Kádár’s views on the conflict. Kádár offered a statement which provided a very concise summary of the matter. “In essence,” he proclaimed, “what is decisive is how Chinese intentions relate to the Soviet Union. We are just puppets in their eyes.” Party relations between the two distant countries were only restored in the second half of the 1980s.

The fifth section of Vámos’s study (1983–1988) was essentially a period in which relations between Hungary and China were settled in the shifting international environment, when it was possible for the first Chinese restaurant in Budapest to open without the Hungarian authorities seeing this as a potential political risk. During this period, economic relations between the East-Central

European countries and China began to develop rapidly, and it became clear that there was no anti-Soviet intention behind the Chinese measures to establish relations. The Chinese leadership was very interested in Hungary's experience of economic reform, but this heightened interest on both sides was not reflected in bilateral trade. Towards the end of the 1980s, as a prelude to the coming era, the issue of Taiwan became an increasingly pressing question or, more precisely, a source of tension in Sino-Hungarian relations, as the decision-makers of the island, which was regarded as a "rebel province" by the Beijing leadership, were turning with increasing interest towards Hungary. Beginning in late 1987, Chinese diplomacy exerted intense pressure on the Hungarian side to curtail its economic ties with Taiwan. It is worth noting that, during this period, a completely parallel process was taking place a little to the east of China and Taiwan. North Korea sought to prevent Hungary from developing close relations with South Korea. The sixth and final section of Vámos's study (1989) focuses on the end of relations between Hungary and China based on shared ideological orientation, and Vámos offers an engaging discussion of the Chinese assessment of Imre Nagy's role (and the importance of his reburial) and the responses in Hungary to the events in Tiananmen Square.

Vámos's volume contains a total of 180 documents on bilateral relations in the period under discussion which offer a nuanced and precise picture not only of the history of relations between the two countries but also of the history of Hungarian diplomacy. The book is thus a pioneering undertaking which presents the evolution of Hungary's relations with China in the context of the changes in Sino-Soviet relations. Vámos shows that the dynamics of Sino-Hungarian relations closely followed the ups and downs of Sino-Soviet relations, and he also makes clear that, since Hungarian policy was always looking for ways to improve relations when China was also willing to do so, relations between Budapest and Beijing developed more rapidly and more dramatically than relations between Beijing and Moscow, especially in the mid to late 1980s. This book will be of interest to sinologists, historians of recent and contemporary diplomatic history, and even practicing diplomats.

Mózes Csoma

Embassy of Hungary to the Republic of Korea and the Democratic
People's Republic of Korea
csoma.mozes@btk.elte.hu